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## Lowering Disciplinary Rates: Looking at Social and Emotional Learning at Blackstone Academy Charter School

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Lowering Disciplinary Rates: Looking at Social and Emotional Learning at Blackstone  
Academy Charter School

Ariel Davey  
May 11, 2020  
Thesis of Public Service at Providence College

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## INTRODUCTION

Everyday there are more and more students who experience trauma in an environment that should protect them the most: their school. Due to a number of policies and political stances, components of the school-to-prison pipeline have entered schools such as the presence of school resource officers, metal detectors, and tracking programs. This leads to students encountering law enforcement or the criminal justice system at earlier ages. Students, especially students of color, have high rates of suspensions, expulsions, or even arrests throughout the United States. Data shows that minor infractions, like doodling on a school desk, may have sent a student to the principal's office in the past now can land students in a jail cell.

Change for this issue needs to come from policy work but it can also come from the individual level. Adding social and emotional learning may be the missing puzzle piece to lower the rates of discipline incidents. Social and emotional learning, a method of learning that helps students develop cognitive skills while dealing with emotional responses in order to communicate with others in a productive way, could benefit students in the long run. Students begin to manage their emotions in a safe, healthy way before entering their futures where second chances may not come as easily to them.

This paper will be broken into several parts. For the first section, I will introduce the statistics on disciplinary actions against both students of color and white students to show the disparity between the two groups. I will also be mentioning the environment that students arrive at as they walk into school. Then, I go on to explain why the statistics are so high, according to my research. In the next section I will begin to introduce social and emotional learning (SEL), defining what it is and what its role in the classroom may look like. I will also touch upon how students can benefit from the implementation of social and emotional learning both in the

classroom and beyond. After analyzing the research, I have done, I will introduce Blackstone Academy Charter School (BACS), a small independent public charter school in Pawtucket, RI. This institution is independently run and managed leaving them with more opportunities for social and emotional learning to happen. Through my study of BACS, I will show how successfully they teach social and emotional skills in student advisory classes. Some of these SEL lessons have been slowly reflected in their academic classes as well. SEL can be implemented in public schools using BACS's method which I'm calling "The Blackstone Way."

## **PHILOSOPHY OF SERVICE**

Service is a complicated idea when broken down by those who take part in it. When participating in service, we often forget why we are serving and how its role contributes to the common good. Service is providing means for those who do not have it. Service is also giving up one's time for their interests and the interests of others to fight for the common good of all. In order to truly participate in service, one must build relationships with others as your neighbor, do not do service unconsciously, and recognize the service you are doing as well as why you are doing that service. Performing service isn't about a person's fulfillment but about the fulfillment of those you are serving. When it comes to building relationships, Martin Luther King, Jr. talks about being a good neighbor and performing all your acts with love, including service. Without building relationships with love, people are unable to feel sympathy for each other genuinely. We are all each other's neighbor and we all have to treat each other with love even if that person is our enemy. Ivan Illich introduces the idea of doing service that you know how to do, rather than the abroad mission trips he condemns. He calls on Americans to keep their intentions for service in their mind as well as knowing why one is doing the service they are doing and paying

attention as to how they're doing service. When doing service, some question their possible role as a "white savior" when performing service. Paulo Freire mentions this in his first chapter of *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*. He mentions that people performing service cannot walk into a community as a savior because it is not going to free the oppressed from being oppressed; only the oppressed can free themselves. It's just as Keith Morton says in his article *Starfish Hurling and Community Service*, problems are more complicated than they appear and it's not only up to one person to think of a solution.

When thinking about the basis of service, many people say they do service to help other people. I said the same when I first began doing service. Once I started to sit and be reflective about the service I was doing, I looked at the population I was working with in comparison to myself. In Paulo Freire's *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, he discusses two groups of people: the oppressed and the oppressors. In the contexts of service, one could say the servers are the oppressors and those being serviced are the oppressed. For my philosophy of service, Freire's words about the power the oppressed have is key when you, yourself, are performing service. By the oppressed feeding into this system of oppression, the oppressed are simply "hosts" of oppressors. Freire explains that once the oppressed stop feeding into this system, they gain the power to liberate themselves:

The central problem is this: How can the oppressed, as divided, unauthentic beings, participate in developing the pedagogy of their liberation? Only as they discover themselves to be "hosts" of the oppressor can they contribute to the midwifery of their liberating pedagogy.

Freire 48.

Through Freire's idea of the oppressed following a system built to silence their voices, Freire highlights the fact that in order for the oppressed to free themselves from this system, they have to be united. When they are united, the oppressed are able to begin the journey towards the

common good and allowing there to be justice in the world. Once this journey begins, the system with oppressors and the oppressed will begin to be broken down. When thinking about Freire's words, it reminds me that not only do the oppressed have to be united, but they also need allies. When participating in service, knowing the definition of what it means to be an ally is essential. To be an ally is to be someone's friend through thick and thin. Being an ally entails being a support system for someone or a group of people who may/may not have the same interests as you through actions of love. In order to help the oppressed or to help those you are serving, you need to be an ally by being a good neighbor.

In Martin Luther King Jr.'s *On Being a Good Neighbor*, King introduces the term "altruism," defined as the practice of unselfishness. King essentially discusses the fact that being a true friend and a good neighbor means being one's ally. It means that they stand with the person they love even in hard times. King believes that being a good neighbor includes risking oneself for another's welfare. In his essay, King describes this empathy that one can develop for another through love:

The ultimate measure of a man is not where he stands in moments of comfort and convenience, but where he stands at times of challenge and controversy. The true neighbor will risk his position, his prestige, and even his life for the welfare of others. In dangerous valleys and hazardous pathways, he will lift some bruised beaten brother to a higher and more noble life.  
King 3.

To be a good neighbor is to have your neighbor's back, to support your neighbor during hardship, and to be personally concerned about your neighbor. When I perform service, I always remember that the work I am doing is not to fulfill myself but to truly put my shoes in the place of those I am serving. In my case, this is acceptable because I was a person in this community when I was younger. I am able to resonate with the population I am serving because we are at the same level in terms of what our interests are. Without a hierarchy in my relationship with this

community, they are more approachable when it comes to introducing new ideas and listening to others and their stories. In my opinion, being a good neighbor also requires listening to others because although you might have been a part of that community like I was in the past, one still doesn't know the obstacles that people experience in that community. Although I used to be a student in a school located in a low-income neighborhood, I don't know every experience every student had in that school system. We have a middle ground on how to relate to each other but storytelling and listening to those stories are still key when doing service with any population to build that relationship to become stronger.

Listening to people's story is a key part of my philosophy of service because it fits into the message being relayed by Keith Morton in his essay *Starfish Hurling and Community Service*. Morton explains the Starfish Hurling story, where one adult teaches a child that they can make a difference one person at a time. Morton critiques it, saying that this story fails to take into account the reality of situations that happen in today's world (Morton 1). Morton uses his words to spell out the fact that when someone is doing service, they are doing intersectional work. Community service is an intersectional job someone volunteers to do in order to help and get justice. Morton explains that community service cannot escape its purpose, "The [starfish] story suggests that all problems are similarly simple -- that there is a path of action which is right and can avoid the traps of politics, context, or complex and contradictory human relationships," (Morton 1). It is not true that service can avoid the intersections of life. Focusing on my current work, the students I work with are students of color, come from low-income urban families/cities, and all coming from a marginalized community. These descriptions about my students are intersectional when it comes to their lives. One cannot separate the person from their situations which can also be intersectional. My neighbor might have different intersections about



them, but I have to love them no matter what they are. Human relationships are essential when thinking about becoming a part of a new community and fighting for the same interests without hesitation. One cannot do this properly without cherishing storytelling and having the open mind to listen to another's story to understand who they are.

The biggest part of service that I have had the hardest struggle with understanding and unpacking are mission trips abroad, religious or non-religious. I read a mind-changing speech at the beginning of my adult service career that affected the way I approach foreign community service. Ivan Illich's *To Hell with Good Intentions* changed my positive outlook on mission trips and was on my mind the entire time I did a mission trip to San Lucas, Guatemala. Illich's main point in his speech is to reject the ideas of foreign community service and to first do service with communities that you can communicate with (using a language you know) and in communities where you can actually help. I agree with a lot of the words Illich shares in his speech. For me, I always think of two questions when thinking about service groups who do service abroad: Are we imposing our "right way" of things onto people who do not lead similar lives than we do? and Are we doing harm or are we truly helping? Illich explains the harm American volunteers may cause in foreign countries, "The damage which volunteers do willy-nilly is too high a price for the belated insight that they shouldn't have been volunteers in the first place," (Illich 6-7). I am always reflecting on the small amounts of training for volunteers going abroad and how unprepared they are to help this community. When taking my mission trip, I always thought about the harm I'm doing to this community because I was there to help but I couldn't even communicate with that community. I went with a class on this mission trip and we got some background about the community and the issues they face but I can't imagine how I would've felt had I not gotten that. Not being able to do service in a way that I was familiar with hit a

nerve with me and this is why I believe completing service to better your own community must come first. Fulfillment from service should not be the reason one does service. Service is about who you are serving, not about yourself or your own feelings.

Service has many components to it and when doing community service, one cannot ignore these components. When doing community service, one has to build relationships with those you are serving. Without communication, how will we know how to best serve people? We cannot blindly go into a community and try to help without listening to people's stories in order to become part of their community and to help better it. People doing service also have to embody the qualities of being a good neighbor, meaning to be a friend and an ally to each person and to do your help through actions of love. If the help you are giving is not genuine then what is the point? When doing service, it is only right to allow those who live being oppressed by oppressor to free themselves with the agency and resources they already have.

## **LITERATURE REVIEW**

### **Source 1: Social and Emotional Learning: Introducing the Issue**

Stephanie Jones and Emily Doolittle explore social and emotional learning (SEL) in their introduction *Social and Emotional Learning: Introducing the Issue*. Jones and Doolittle promote SEL, stating that it helps students with achieving academic goals and being an active member of the community. The authors define SEL as:

At its core, SEL involves children's ability to learn about and manage their own emotions and interactions in ways that benefit themselves and others, and that help children and youth succeed in schooling, the workplace, relationships, and citizenship. To effectively manage emotions and social interactions requires a complex interplay of cognitive skills, such as attention and the ability to solve problems; beliefs about the self, such as perceptions of competence and autonomy; and social awareness, including empathy for others and the ability to resolve conflicts.

Jones & Doolittle 4

SEL helps students develop skills needed to manage themselves in public settings such as competence and awareness of self. These skills are useful to students when they are in control of situations like their education. Teachers, some of the time, don't understand the experiences their students go through. Because of this, teachers may not understand the behavior of some of their students if they aren't aware or conscious of their student's personal life. SEL can educate both educators and students. Teachers and school staff would need to be educated about SEL and its practices before being able to teach it. Once it is implemented and integrated in class lessons, students will gain skills to help them express themselves and build relationships with others better. This relationship building may lead to fewer disciplinary punishments for students with high levels of these skills.

Jones and Doolittle break SEL into three different categories. For my research, I focused on their category of *emotional processes*. After describing SEL in textbook terms, Jones and Doolittle interpret SEL in their own way:

Compare that to the framework developed by Stephanie Jones (one of the editors of this issue), which organizes SEL competencies into three types rather than five: *cognitive regulation*-- the ability to focus attention, plan, solve problems, coordinate behavior, make choices among competing alternatives, and override a preferred response in favor of a more appropriate one; *emotional processes*-- the ability to recognize, express, and regulate one's own emotions and understand the emotions of others; and *social and interpersonal skills*-- the ability to accurately interpret other people's behavior, effectively navigate social situations, and interact positively with peers and adults.

Jones & Doolittle 5-6

Emotion processes activities are important to incorporate into SEL. Without these activities, students won't be able to see that the space that they are in is one where they can be vulnerable and trusting. Strong teacher-student relationships and being able to express one's emotion is essential to think about when looking at disciplinary rates for students of color. If students of color were given the opportunity to express their feelings, emotions, and experiences with their

teacher and their classmates in a safe space then maybe the stereotypes and biases that people hold against them may go away. People in this environment might help others realize their stereotypes and bias with different races or people who don't look like them. SEL can help students guide their way through school and through life. Jones and Doolittle briefly mention that SEL is still disconnected from disciplinary practices as well as teacher professional development which are the two categories that could benefit from SEL the most when trying to lower disciplinary rates among students of color (Jones & Doolittle 7).

### **Source 2: Social and Emotional Learning and Equity in School Discipline**

The discussion of taking account of different cultures, beliefs, and different biases people hold when looking at SEL programs occurs in Anne Gregory and Edward Fergus's *Social and Emotional Learning and Equity in School Discipline*. The authors focus on race and gender disparities in black and white youth because of the discipline gaps between the two groups. The authors reiterate the fact that disciplinary rates among students of color are higher than white student's rates. Gregory and Fergus also entertain the idea that the blame lie with the bias the adult giving punishments but it's not the only thing to blame:

Other studies have shown that black students are at risk for receiving harsher sanctions when compared to white students whose misconduct was equally serious. When a black student and a white student who are comparable in many ways are issued discipline referrals for similar reasons, the black student is more likely to receive an out-of-school suspension-- thereby losing more days of instruction than the white student, who is more likely to receive detention or in-school suspension. This suggests that the adult assigning the sanctions may harbor implicit or explicit racial bias. Yet attributing racial disparities to bias on the part of adults who assign sanctions is too simplistic. Bias-based beliefs and inappropriate processes and procedures in the school's structure also contribute to racial inequality.

Gregory & Fergus 119-120

Gregory and Fergus explain that black students are missing from the classroom due to out-of-school suspensions more often than white students. They suggest that in order to close this gap not only will students have to gain skills but adults also have to look at the biases they hold when

analyzing a case of school code violation. Gregory and Fergus introduce the possibility of disciplinarian's bias when it comes to the punishment black students receive versus a punishment a white student receives for a similar violation. This bias can also be seen in school policies and procedures.

### **Source 3: Pushout: The Criminalization of Black Girls**

Monique Morris discusses the pushout of Black girls from the education system in her book *Pushout: The Criminalization of Black Girls*. In her chapter *A Blues for Black Girls: When "Attitude" is Enuf*, Morris dives into the statistics of Black girls being suspended from school. She explains that although black girls don't hold nearly half the population of children in school, they have a high rate of suspension in schools:

While Black girls are nearly 16 percent of girls enrolled in school, a figure that has declined only slightly in the last decade, their rate of discipline has remained elevated. In 2000, Black girls were 34 percent of girls experiencing an out-of-school suspension. In 2006, Black girls represented 43 percent of out-of-school suspension among girls. By the 2009 academic year, Black girls without a disability were 52 percent of all girls with multiple out-of-school suspensions. In the 2011-12 school year, there were eighteen states with out-of-school suspension rates for Black girls higher than the national average (12 percent). Across southern states, Black girls are particularly vulnerable to the use of exclusionary discipline. Representing 24 percent of girls in the region, but 75 percent of girls receiving an out-of-school suspension.

Morris 68

Morris explains that these girls are given out-of-school suspensions at a high rate. She continues to show that black girls are more likely to be suspended over a white student. Black students are more likely to be reprimanded for their behavior and receive this harsher punishment of an out-of-school suspension than a white student who most likely would receive a warning for the same violation. What Morris shows in *Pushout* that is relevant to my research is these rates haven't changed. She shows the statistics going all the way back to the year 2000 and these suspension rates for black girls in American have continued to be high regardless of the policies or rule

changes both in the U.S. and the educational system in America. Why have these rates not decreased? I believe that schools individually as well as all schools in the education system are capable of instituting education for teachers to lower these rates as well as teachers teaching skills that may lead a student to be more reflective about the behavior they're displaying rather than lashing out.

Morris goes into expulsion rates thereafter and they aren't much better than the suspension rates. She quotes a statistic on expulsion rates from the African American Policy Forum, "[In] a report by the African American Policy Forum, it was noted that Black girls are expelled from New York schools at fifty-three times the rate for White girls and resort to acting out (using profanity, fighting, having tantrums, etc.) when their counseling needs are ignored," (Morris 69-70). Like the suspension rates, expulsion rates for black girls are higher than any other student population. In this example, one can see that a black girl is considered for expulsion for swearing or fighting when this does not automatically happen for white students. The punishment for violations is unequal for students of color versus punishments for white students. Entertaining the punishment of suspension and expulsion starts with an authority figure in any situation. Authority needs to understand the trauma that students of color experience before laying down these harsh punishments that could lead to students getting involved in things that they shouldn't be. I also think that teaching students how to deal and express the pain and hurt from the trauma is extremely important, which I will get into at another time.

Morris also discusses the idea of adultification taking place in society which affects the way black girls are treated in school. In her chapter *Struggling to Survive*, Morris introduces the idea of adultification of black girls:

As children or as adults, Black girls are treated as if they are supposed to "know better," or at least "act like" they know. The assignment of more adultlike characteristics to the expressions of young Black girls is a form age compression. Along this truncated age continuum, Black girls are likened

more to adults than to children and are treated as if they are willfully engaging in behaviors typically expected of adults-- sexual involvement, parenting or primary caregiver, workforce participation, and other adult behaviors and responsibilities.

Morris 34

Morris explains adultification as a perspective that other people have when analyzing black girls.

Black girls are treated as adults because a lot of people adultify black girls. Black girls are assumed to be older than they are so when they are being disciplined because of a minor infraction, they might be analyzed and handled more harshly. Black girls are assumed to act and behave older than they are and it is assumed that a black girl “stepping out of line” is talking back to a teacher. This leads to the high rates of disciplinary action against black girls and other students of color.

#### **Source 4: Social and Emotional Learning in the Classroom**

Social and emotional learning (SEL) practices can be adjusted to suit all types of students. In Merrell and Gueldner’s chapter *One Size Does Not Fit All: Adapting Social and Emotional Learning for Use in our Multicultural World*, the authors discuss the fact that SEL activities need to target the audience of students getting taught these skills with help from Sara Castro-Olivo. Merrell and Gueldner discuss culturally and linguistically diverse (CLD) youth in this chapter, using them as an example of our multicultural world changing and education having to adapt to tackle the new issues students face. These students, also identified as students of color, experience trauma just as another student of color might face but have a different story. SEL can be adapted according to the students a teacher is serving in order to respect different cultures, as Merrell and Gueldner explain, “Making cultural adaptations to existing SEL programs not only allows us to engage in culturally sensitive practices by showing that we care about and understand these populations, but it also allows us to make the material more accessible and relevant to students from diverse backgrounds,” (Merrell & Gueldner 85). The

authors emphasize the importance of adapting a program or activities due to culture because to start to understand other people's experiences, one has to respect them and what they have to say/contribute. Without letting them know that they and their voice are welcomed, students won't be able to begin building stronger relationships with their teacher(s) or classmates.

Merrell and Gueldner suggest guidelines for educators to follow when making SEL activities culturally adaptive. Some of the principles the authors suggested to educators to think about when adapting SEL curricula that stuck out to me were getting to know your students, getting to know your students' community, encouraging tolerance, and becoming aware of variations within cultures (Merrell & Gueldner 95). To start, I believe in order to make progress on developing student's social and emotional skills knowing your students and the communities they come from is the first step a teacher should take. Without understanding the culture and community norms your student follows, there is no way a teacher can respect the culture or implement those values into a classroom environment. The student might feel respected and appreciated if the class knew the obstacles that are in the way for students of color when accomplishing their goals. This will help the teacher when adapting SEL activities because now they know which examples or topics might not be the best to use in front of a certain group of students. Encouraging tolerance follows this idea of knowing your student and their environment in order to understand and respect other cultures. By encouraging tolerance, the educator is now teaching their students to follow them in respecting cultures and learning about them. When people learn about cultures different from their own, they begin to see that all cultures are different. This will start to open the eyes of educators as well as students to stop assuming something about a student's culture or ethnicity because they will realize that not every member of a certain culture acts the same way or lives similar lives. People will also start to see the



similarities of values between different cultures and conclude that we aren't as different as we think to seem. When re-evaluating SEL programming to fit the needs of students of color, these are good guidelines to keep in mind to create a vulnerable place in a classroom for students.

**Source 5: Locating Black Girls in Education Policy Discourse: Implications for The Every Student Succeeds Act**

In their article *Locating Black Girls in Education Policy Discourse: Implications for The Every Student Succeeds Act*, Evans-Winters, et al. explain the rates of suspension and expulsion of black girls in the U.S. education system. While previously mentioning that black girls are disciplined in a school setting at higher rates than their white classmates, the authors focus in on the disciplinary rates for this fact:

According to the African American Policy Forum... Black girls across the United States are suspended 6 times more often than White Girls. By comparison, Black boys are suspended 3 times more often than White boys. In contrast, only 2% of White girls were subjected to exclusionary suspensions, compared with 12% Black girls.

Evans-Winters, et al. 5

Black girls are affected by disciplinary actions in schools even more so than Black boys. While both groups of students of color are very much affected by these reprimands, white students don't experience nearly as much discipline towards them. These rates show that students of color are being pushed out by discipline policies enforced in school settings. These policies greatly affect students of color because although white students violate policies just like students of color, their punishment is unequal.

Venus Evans-Winters, et al. also state why these rates are high: punitive discipline policies in schools like zero tolerance policies. Policies such as these make black girls vulnerable in school settings. This article shows that zero-tolerance policies don't affect white students the same as it does to black students. The authors explain that "[where] middle-class White youth found to be in violation of zero-tolerance policies... tend to be assigned to counseling or receive a

slap on the wrist for violation of schools code, non-White youth are more likely to come in contact with police officers and, consequently, the juvenile correctional system,” (Evans-Winters, et al., 2). Although white students violate school codes including zero tolerance policies but do not receive equal punishment to their non-white counterpart. While white students are more likely referred to counselors or given a warning, black students are more likely to be sent to a school resource officer or be suspended for a certain amount of days. With students of color being reprimanded differently and at times more harshly than white students, this makes students of color more susceptible to coming in contact with the correctional system. The way zero tolerance policies are enforced in schools is relevant to the topic of this paper because zero tolerance policies affect students of color the most. Students of color are punished for simple infractions causing them to be absent from the classroom for longer periods of time than their white classmates. Because they are missing instruction due to something such as behavior, their education is detrimentally affected from reprimand.

**Source 6: Homogeneity and Inequality: School Discipline Inequality and the Role of Racial Composition**

Linsey Edwards from Princeton University writes about the inequality of discipline rates between black and white students and how race plays a part in this inequality. Edwards continues the conversation of high disciplinary rates amongst students of color, “During the 2011-12 school year, black students were three times more likely than white students to receive out-of-school suspensions,” (Edwards 55). Again there are higher rates for suspension for students of color than white students. This high statistic shows the disproportionality of black students being disciplined in the school system. One then has to question why it is this way. This is because of race.

Educators don't often understand their students or the situations they go through on a daily basis. This leads educators to assume factors in their student's lives and about how teachers think their students behave. This leads to bias in terms of race in the classroom, "Most extant explanations of racial inequality in discipline focus on interpersonal factors-- for example, teacher perceptions and the effect of racial bias for decision-making-- leaving us little knowledge of the institutional-level factors that create for unequal outcomes," (Edwards 70). Due to unrealized racial bias in the classroom, a situation as small as disobedience can turn into a situation where a student may be suspended for this simple infraction. These situations may become escalated because of a misunderstanding or because the student is lashing out at another issue that is happening in their life. Instead of a punishing moment, this can turn into a situation where a conversation might be had before the student is dismissed.

**Source 7: Ghetto Schooling: a political economy of urban teaching: Ch 7**

Jean Anyon explains the condition of urban schools in the United States. The seventh chapter of the book, *Class Race, Taxes, and State Reform: 1970-1997*, she discusses the poor conditions of school building in urban communities, pulling an example from the ineffective New Jersey school system during this time period. New Jersey really struggled to fund education for children because of a long list of issues. In 1990, the Quality Education Act (QEA) was passed, increasing the education budget by \$1.5 billion. This helped students gain a better quality education as well as it being intended to close the disparity gap. When this act wasn't successfully implemented and highly protested by citizens, the QEA was revised and was now called QEA II. Anyon explains how these changes affected schools, "The districts spent the money primarily for three purposes: "catch up expenditures" (new buildings, extra teachers, more supplies), social support programs from disadvantaged students, and expenditures to

improve the quality of instruction, for example, staff development,” (Anyon 143). With crumbling schools, including the system and the building itself, students were receiving an unequal education to those who can afford an education. Anyon shows that although the budget was increased, it didn’t help the schools much because they were trying to catch up with areas that were neglected due to funding, like the building structure. One of the areas that is important to my research is hiring quality teachers. Anyon writes that without funding, education departments and schools are unable to hire teachers who are more qualified in their field. Without more experienced teachers, the education a child receives is not equal to a child that is taught by an experienced teacher. Urban schools usually don’t attract quality and experienced educators because of the environment and conditions of public/state schools. With better conditions, treatment, and salary at private/privately-funded schools, why would a teacher want to settle in a situation that isn’t the best for them? Another issue key to my research is the quality of school buildings.

Anyon, again using New Jersey schools as an example, shows how bad the building conditions have gotten. From this information, one thinks of other communities besides New Jersey and how their schools are. The condition of building is important because with Anyon’s description, it shows what conditions students are learning in:

Physical conditions in most of the schools observed by the comprehensive compliance team reveal... neglect and dereliction of duty. Holes in floors and walls; dirty classrooms with blackboards worn as to be unusable; filthy lavatories without toilet paper, soap or paper towels; inoperable water fountains;... and foul-smelling effluent running from a school into the street, speak of disregard for the dignity, safety, basic comfort and sense of well-being of students and teachers.

Anyon 145

With crumbling schools that include anything from unqualified teachers to lack of basic supplies, students are not receiving the same education as other students. Students, usually enrolled in

public/state schools, don't receive equal education because of the lack of funding. A student's education shouldn't suffer because of an issue out of their hands. The New Jersey situation failed students for several years due to a lack of communication and urgency. With students learning in an environment like Anyon describes, they are not able to excel in their academics with poor quality conditions.

**Source 8: Social and Emotional Learning: Promoting the Development of All Students**

Joseph Zins and Maurice Elias discuss youth development in their article *Social and Emotional Learning: Promoting the Development of All Students*. They introduce social and emotional learning (SEL) in the context they will be analyzing this practice. They mention the skills that students will develop when schools successfully adopting this curriculum:

In simple terms, social and emotional learning (SEL) is the capacity to recognize and manage emotions, solve problems effectively, and establish positive relationships with others, competencies that clearly are essential for all students. Thus, SEL targets a combination of behaviors, cognitions, and emotions... SEL is the process of acquiring and effectively applying the knowledge; attitudes, and skills necessary to recognize and manage emotions; developing caring and concern for others; making responsible decisions; establishing positive relationships; and handling challenging situations capably.

Zins & Elias 234

This definition of SEL shows the skills students acquire from SEL. Establishing positive relationships, especially with educators, is key when connecting SEL to disciplinary gaps. This relates to teachers understanding their students and knowing when they're having a bad day. This might help prevent a disciplinary situation between teacher and student deescalate before it is handed over to administrators who wouldn't know the student personally. With better relationships with students, teachers are able to share the students experiences with other people to educate them on how to approach a child that has experienced trauma and has a hard time opening up. SEL can be implemented in school to welcome vulnerability and help students express their emotions to become more in control of their behavior, which is one of the leading

causes a student is referred to the principal's office. With SEL implementation, students adopt new attitudes such as developing a greater trust and respect for teachers, new behaviors like less drug, tobacco, and alcohol use and delinquent behavior, as well as improving in performance like improving the learning-to-learn skill (Zins and Elias 241). With these new skills, students are better able to advocate for themselves when having a strong relationship with their teacher(s) when it comes to disciplinary actions.

**Source 9: Girlhood Interrupted: The Erasure of Black Girls' Childhood**

Epstein, Blake, and González describe the mindset that white adults have that affect the livelihood of black youth. This article explores the idea of adultification, which is “a form of dehumanization, robbing Black children of the very essence of what makes childhood distinct from all other developmental periods: innocence,” (Epstein, Blake, & González 6).

Adultification is summarized as the perception adults have of youth where they see this youth older than they actually are, erasing the innocence one should have when approaching a child. This idea of adultification finds its way into classrooms and school environments when a child is disciplined and reprimanded. The idea of the ‘angry black woman’ appears to authority figures when it comes to dealing with situations where the authority figure feels as though their control is or may become compromised. This leads Black girls to be treated harshly when receiving punishments or when they are handled. Adultification is the reason an educator may ask a student to leave a classroom before giving them a warning or the reason why a school resource officer might handle a student with more violence than necessary.

In *Girlhood Interrupted*, a study was conducted giving a survey to adults, mostly white adults, to measure their perception of black girlhood in relation to their innocence. From this study, it was concluded that starting as early as the age of 5, black girls seem to act and behave

older than they are. This is important when looking at the treatment of black girls in violation of school policies versus white students in violation. Epstein, Blake, and González explain that adultification is the reason for these harsher punishments against students of color, especially black girls. They touch upon the fact that the decision whether or not a student is suspended, expelled, or given another punishment lies in the hands of school administrators, “Significant to the results of our study, Black girls are more likely to “experience exclusionary discipline outcomes for subjective reasons, such as disobedience/defiance, detrimental behavior, and third-degree assault, all of which depend on the subjective judgement of school personnel,” (Epstein, Blake, & González 9). While the student may violate the school code, is it at the discretion of administrators to assign the punishment to the student. This reprimand by administrators occurs because of the judgement educators have of their students, specifically students of color. Educators may assume a student’s behavior in the classroom or believe it is disruptive rather than asking why their student is behaving this way. Educators who don’t know their students are more likely to shut them down and send them to an administrator’s office because they might label their student as impossible when that educator might not have considered why their student is acting out in class. The student is given a punishment that doesn’t help them deal with situations they experience as well as negatively affecting their education.

**Source 10: Promoting Emotional and Social Development in Schools: A Practical Guide:**  
**Ch 6**

When promoting social and emotional development in schools, educators have to find ways social and emotional learning (SEL) can sneak its way into curriculum. *Promoting Emotional and Social Development in Schools: A Practical Guide* uses its chapter *Promoting calmness, anger management, and stress reduction* to share activities that could become beneficial to students when developing this side of SEL. Some of the activities that I want to

focus on in this chapter are circle time as well as visualization. When it comes to circle time, I believe the name can be tweaked depending on the ages in the group. Simon Blake states that circle times can help with conflict resolution and emotional literacy (Blake 84). Implementing circle time in the classroom can help students not only learn how to express their feelings but it helps them address what emotion their feeling and how to communicate that to others to end at a resolution for the situation.

Blake also offers visualization as a way to promote positivity in schools. Blake states that completing an activity and ending up with a physical product may help students feel positive as well as developing empathy through imagination (Blake 85). One activity that I can see promoting SEL through visualization is art activities whether than is painting, sketching, creating music, or dancing. For example, a teacher could conduct a community mapping project to display resources and things to do in the community. This will allow students to show their perspective of what they notice in their community and learn about resources they were unaware about. This activity promotes communication, vulnerability, and creativity in students, developing their social and emotional skills.

### **Source 11: Youth Activism in an Era of Education Inequality**

Ben Kirshner introduces the idea of social and emotional learning connecting it to positive youth development. First, Kirshner discusses zero tolerance policies in the context of Latinx students' experience on Cinco de Mayo at the high school he was studying. He explains that zero tolerance policies aren't "effective nor just," (Kirshner 27). He also states that because of zero tolerance policies, the events that occurred at this high school on Cinco de Mayo escalated because the authority figures in this situation do not know the students they are serving. Then the year following, the school had more law enforcement on school grounds to prevent any



violence. Kirshner called this a “Band-Aid that did not heal a deeper problem,” (Kirshner 27). Rather than address the real problem like racist or bias that might occur in social situations, this school decided to attack the issue hands off. Kirshner then talks about social and emotional learning as the first step to addressing the real problem.

Social and emotional learning (SEL), according to Kirshner, is essential when it comes to youth development. He introduces positive youth development (PYD) and how programs are structured, opening the opportunity for SEL to occur. Kirshner describes positive youth development programs:

The typical PYD program, if guided by “best practices” in the field, would create a safe space for people like [the students participating in my study]... If high quality, these are setting where young people encounter caring adults who go by their first names and build relationships that attend to the many parts of a young person’s life, including school, family, peers, and future aspirations.

Kirshner 29

Positive youth development programs, according to Kirshner, should be a welcoming and equal space for students to build a relationship with their educator(s). With this space, youth, especially youth of color, are able to learn how to communicate with adults effectively. If this is successful, this communication between educator and student might be able to occur before the student is referred to the administrator and be disciplined. SEL can help in this way: teaching students to effectively communicate their feelings with adults who they have a good relationship with.

**Source 12: Promoting Social and Emotional Learning: Guidelines for Educators: Ch 1, 2, & 3**

Maurice Elias, et al. discuss the definition of social and emotional learning (SEL) as well as the benefits and methods in the first few chapters of their book *Promoting Social and Emotional Learning: Guidelines for Educators*. To begin, Elias, et al. introduce SEL in the

framework of their literature, calling it the “missing piece” of education in today’s world. The authors define SEL:

Social and emotional competence is the ability to understand, manage, and express the social and emotional aspects of one’s life in ways that enable the successful management of life tasks such as learning, forming relationships, solving everyday problems, and adapting the complex demands of growth and development. It includes self-awareness, control of impulsivity, working cooperatively, and caring about oneself and others.

Elias, et al. 2

Elias, et. al explain the implementation of SEL through curriculum using examples from the New Haven, CT developmental skills. This “missing piece” of education can be put back in place with these different skills and attitudes that students develop. The lesson plan teachers create can involve different activities to teach students social and emotional skills. Elias, et al. share that with these classroom lessons children can learn life lessons and how to be an active part of the community they live in (Elias et. al 9).

When creating this lesson plan, teachers need to be reflective and keep their student’s experiences in mind. Elias, et al. pose questions that teachers should keep in mind when creating these teaching lessons for their students. Questions include: *What activities outside the classroom, but within the school context, support SEL (e.g., extracurricular activities, clubs, playground games)?; What community activities support the school’s SEL efforts?; and To what extent and in what ways do school-level efforts to enhance students’ social and emotional skills reinforce classroom-based SEL instruction and programming?* (Elias, et al. 16). These set of questions are particularly important when it comes to my research because these questions really get to the core of how educators should be approaching SEL in the classroom. They should be asking themselves what resources are available to students to continue their SEL journey outside of school. These resources can be there for students when school isn’t in session. It also allows teachers to use resources outside of the school because the school might not offer enough support

or resources to teachers in this area. The community activities and organizations that are available for the community to use can really make an impact on students because they begin to realize that learning and development doesn't only happen in a classroom. It can happen anywhere.

Elias, et al. then go into explaining how to implement the education of social and emotional skills into schools/classrooms. First, the authors introduce storytelling as a way to start SEL in the classroom. With storytelling, students and teachers can learn about each other's experiences. This brings back the idea of SEL being the "missing piece" to education, bridging academics and real life. One of the ways storytelling, as previously mentioned, can affect relationships and student's behavior. Having an opportunity to communicate and express themselves in this academic setting is key to teaching students about impulse control and respect:

*Self-control skills* are necessary to accurately process the information contained in social encounters, to engage in thoughtful social decision making, and to be able to approach others in difficult situations without provoking anger or annoyance... *Group participation skills* underlie the exercise of social responsibility, constructive task-oriented contributions in groups, and the building of meaningful communities.

Elias, et al. 27

*Promoting Social and Emotional Learning: Guidelines for Educators* really brings to light how important community building is when enacting and teaching SEL. This community building and group participation activities teach students that we are all beings who migrate towards a sense of belonging. With a community building in the classroom amongst students and the teacher, or teachers, students realize what a priority communication and listening are important in life. SEL is able to teach this lesson for students to carry in any situation they find themselves in, such as receiving disciplinary action due to violation.

**Source 13: Criminalizing the Classroom: The Rise of Aggressive Policing and Zero Tolerance Discipline in New York City Schools**

In this article, Ofer reviews the history of the school-to-prison pipeline in New York City. He concludes that with the help of the Board of Education, the mayor's office, and the NYPD, public schools in NYC became spaces that made students feel as if they were criminals in a prison. Zero tolerance policies were given down to students within question. The number of police present in schools dramatically increased with the installation of metal detectors as well. The school environment for students was no longer a safe one. Ofer also provides some solutions to the school-to-prison pipeline for NYC schools and all schools in general: restorative justice.

### **THE STATISTICS BEHIND DISCIPLINE IN SCHOOLS FOR STUDENTS OF COLOR**

When looking at discipline statistics for students of color nationally, including suspension and expulsion rates, one is able to see that black students get disciplined more often than white students are. Their environment, including the school building itself, other students, teachers, and other faculty, also play a part in why statistics for suspension and expulsion of students of color is much higher than for white students. Different components of school life for a lot of urban low-income students includes being stopped and searched by police officers in school hallways, passing through metal detectors to get into the building, and being punished for behavior by police that usually doesn't reach the criminal justice status. There are several reasons why these incidents occur in these settings and the root of these incidents shows how important it could be to implement social and emotional learning in the classroom.

#### ***Statistics of Discipline Between Students of Color and White Students***

In order to understand why social and emotional learning can be beneficial in the classroom, especially for students who have experienced severe trauma, one has to understand

the issues in the classroom which are happening in today's world and why we need social and emotional learning to occur. A lot of urban schools across America have begun to turn into criminalized spaces. According to my research, although black students may represent a small number of students (18%) enrolled in schools across the U.S., they represented almost half of the single and multiple suspensions in school (Edwards 55). Morris supports this statistic with her own research:

While Black girls are nearly 16 percent of girls enrolled in school, a figure that has declined only slightly in the last decade, their rate of discipline has remained elevated. In 2000, Black girls were 34 percent of girls experiencing an out-of-school suspension. In 2006, Black girls represented 43 percent of out-of-school suspension among girls. By the 2009 academic year, Black girls without a disability were 52 percent of all girls with multiple out-of-school suspensions. In the 2011-12 school year, there were eighteen states with out-of-school suspension rates for Black girls higher than the national average (12 percent). Across southern states, Black girls are particularly vulnerable to the use of exclusionary discipline. Representing 24 percent of girls in the region, but 75 percent of girls receiving an out-of-school suspension.<sup>2</sup>

Morris 68.

Morris's research is important when looking at school discipline for black students, black girls specifically. The misbehavior in schools was declining yet the suspension rate for black girls continued to be as high as it is. Morris, like many of the authors from my research, focuses on black girls and how they are targeted and punished more than black boys are. Black girls are the most vulnerable students in a classroom setting. Venus Evans-Winters also supports Morris's claim of the harsh treatment of black girls in schools. She states that in Chicago Public Schools, black girls stood for 78 percent of the out-of-school suspensions while Latina girls stood for 20 percent and white girls only a small 1.45 percent (Evans-Winters 5). Black girls are beginning to be punished more than black boys, while also receiving harsher punishments for minor infractions.

Black girls are being punished at a higher rate than their male counterparts. Nonetheless, both groups of students have high rates of in-school and out-of-school suspensions. Gregory and

Fergus discuss the fact that black students are more likely to receive harsher punishments for a minor infraction similar to one that may be committed by a white student (Gregory and Fergus 119-120). Black students commit the same type of infractions that all students do but are more harshly punished. Some of the incidents that are classified as ‘minor’ may be skipping class, not following school rules like the dress code, and being disobedient. These incidents may be traumatic to black students and may affect how they handle themselves in the classroom as they continue their education. This trauma that students hold onto affects how they interact with authority figures like teachers, principals, and police officers. When looking at these statistics, one wonders what is going on in these schools and what we can do to turn it around.

### ***School Environment: School Conditions and Teacher Connection***

The high rates of suspension and expulsion of students of color relate to many things that are going on in a school’s environment. One of the things that affect a student’s learning is their literal environment. Jean Anyon makes a suggestion as to how and why the school’s environment is the way it is today. In her book *Ghetto Schooling: A Political Economy on Urban Teaching*, she dives into the funding of schools, specifically in New Jersey, in her seventh chapter. First, Anyon discusses the case *Abbott v. Burke* (1990), where legislative approaches began for educational reform. One of the conclusions of this case was that “funding should not be supplied to poorer urban districts, because it may be mismanaged and wasted,” (Anyon 139). Originally the taxes from these communities were going to fund schools but the community knew that, based on the average salary of adults in the neighborhood, this money would not be enough. Schools all over the nation, including in New Jersey, are severely impacted by a lack of funds, especially in schools that serve a high number of students of color. Believing that school

funds may be misused in urban neighborhoods is assuming that the schools are struggling financially because of their low socio-economic status neighborhood population. The courts didn't want to put financial decisions in the hands of these communities, afraid that the money wouldn't be going to the *right* thing, as if there weren't multiple areas where more funding could benefit such as educational resources (computers, copy paper, better teachers) or building repairs. Anyon also discusses the issue of mismanagement, politics, and other factors in schools that play into a school's environment, or a school's culture (Anyon 141). She states that less mismanagement has happened in schools, rather that the role of politics that seeps into schools affects the culture more so. The "politics" that enters schools are the implementation of police officers, which may also count for whatever mismanagement may occur in schools.

In Udi Ofer's journal article *Criminalizing the Classroom: The Rise in Aggressive Policing and Zero Tolerance Discipline in New York City Public Schools*, he discusses the implementation of police officers in NYC public schools in one aspect of his article. Anyon's view of funds being mismanaged in schools or school districts can be shown through Ofer's research of NYC public schools. One can see the implementation and funding of police officers in schools, as Ofer focuses on NYC schools, as a mismanagement of funds because rather than look into why these students are misbehaving so often and create curriculum that allows students to express their feelings and emotions in a healthy, constructive way. Students who have this opportunity in school are less likely to get in trouble or get suspended/expelled. The funds that are used to pay for police officers to "keep students safe" can go to promote activities and a curriculum that supports emotional learning and positively impacts student outcomes. This implementation of programs rather than of police officers help lower a student's likelihood of encountering the criminal justice system or facing suspension or expulsion.

One other part of the puzzle when looking at the high rates of suspension and expulsion for students of color is a teacher's perception of them. Morris introduces the idea of adultification, specifically talking about black girls in her novel *Pushout*. According to Morris, adultification is "the assignment of more adultlike characteristics to the expressions of young Black girls is a form of age compression... Black girls are likened more to adults than to children and are treated as if they are willingly engaging in behaviors typically expected of adults," (Morris 34). Adultification is an aspect that plays into a relationship a teacher has with their student. There are two circumstances that are likely to occur in school settings that may be the reason there are high rates of suspension and expulsion for students of color. On the one hand, a teacher might perceive a student more as an adult than a minor, which could lead a teacher to believe they are in danger when around certain students. A teacher may perceive some students as more dangerous due to the bias that they hold against different races. This may lead to an inequality in discipline between different races.

Linsey Edwards continues to explain Morris's idea of adultification when it comes to the teacher-student relationship. She explains the relationship between race and punishment in school settings. Although there have been school rules put in place to standardize discipline, outside factors such as bias and stereotyping blur the concern that teachers have for students, and Edwards supports this and uses Morris's *Pushout* as an example:

Researchers in schools finds that teachers who hold similar racial stereotypes about blacks react more quickly and harshly to misbehavior by blacks and focus more seriously on behavior modification. Morris, for example, found that teachers in one middle school perceived black girls as loud and challenging of authority, and thus ultimately not "ladylike."<sup>11</sup>

Edwards 58-59

Edwards discusses the role a teacher's bias and stereotype play into the punishments that are given in the classroom. Due to the beliefs some teachers may have against their students, discipline for students of color may be mismatched to the discipline that a white student may



receive for the same misbehavior. Edwards then points out that a lot of the behavior issues are reported by teachers but decisions are essentially taken care of by school administrators. She highlights the fact that administrators are also those that decide if a certain behavior is deviant and what type of disciplinary action, if any, needs to occur (Edwards 60). If a student were to have a better relationship with their teacher, this may help lower the high statistics of disciplinary rates. With a better teacher-student relationship, the teacher may understand why a student acts the way they do or why they might've had an outburst in the middle of class. Teachers might handle disciplinary situations differently if their relationship to their students is stronger. In order for this to occur, teachers need to recognize their racial bias and stereotypes they hold in order to see past that and serve their students to the best of their ability.

To continue with the idea of adultification, Rebecca Epstein uses a study that she conducted to show that adults perceive black girls as more adult-like compared to their white peers, especially around the ages of 5-14 (Epstein 1). With Epstein's study, readers are able to see why the rates of discipline for students of color are high. Students of color, specifically black girls in Epstein's study, are seen as not being worthy of being/acting like a child. Because they aren't seen as children and are perceived older than they are, black children are often punished for exhibiting normal behavior seen as disruptive (Epstein 4). Although Epstein's research reflects the mindset of everyday adults, this group includes people like teachers, principals, and other adults who handle student discipline such as police officers. She points out the significance of her findings, concluding that adultification [of black girls] plays into how and why they're disciplined:

If authorities in public systems view Black girls as less innocent, less needing of protections, and generally more like adults, it appears likely that they would also view Black girls as more culpable for their actions and, on that basis, punish them more harshly despite their status as children.<sup>15</sup>

Epstein 8

Although Black girls may not break any school rules or policies, she may be punished for her behavior in the classroom. Adultification is highlighted in these situations because without the role of adultification, teachers would be less likely to remove black girls from the classroom. In her quote, Evans-Winters also points out the lack of protection for black girls by everyday people. Where can these girls rely on an adult to protect them if the place that is made to do that is failing them? The lack of protection from teachers and from other faculty members of the school affects students of color the most when it comes to their development and their opportunities for success in the future.

Joseph Zins and Maurice Elias discuss the reason as to why there are high dropout rates among students and he concludes it to three factors. These factors are social and emotional factors: not getting along with teachers, staff, and other students, feeling left out, and not feeling safe (Zins and Elias 234). Zins and Elias show the importance of having a healthy, positive relationship with your teacher(s). With a better relationship between teachers and students, students are able to learn and feel protected in school. They would be more understood by teachers and could decrease the use of punitive punishment. This then would allow teachers to teach social and emotional skills to students who now feel safe and protected in a classroom because of their relationship with their teacher.

Zins and Elias continue and discuss their support for social and emotional learning in schools. SEL promotes a positive environment for all students. In their text *Social and Emotional Learning: Promoting The Development of All Students*, they state that there have been increasingly positive outcomes to social and emotional learning. They add that the relationship between teacher and students is key to SEL. By seeing SEL, teachers recognized that in order to support their students they needed to build a personal and academic relationship with their

students (Zins and Elias 234). This adds to a student's confidence level and success rate because the student(s) know that they have someone supporting them. With more confidence and a support system, the rate of students dropping out or leaving school may decrease over time with better teacher-student relationships. Teachers are able to teach their students healthy habits as well as how to identify and act on unhealthy behaviors by themselves or others (Zins and Elias 235). This relationship benefits the teacher, student, and school as a whole.

### ***The Role of Zero Tolerance Policies in Schools***

Zero tolerance policies have played a part in the inequality of discipline between races as well as between gender. Zero tolerance policies is the political aspect in schools that have changed the environment of many schools. These types of policies have been known to have an effect of violence against racialized and gendered bodies. Zero tolerance policies have affected both black boys and girls in school settings which show the inequality of discipline between students of color and white students. Venus Evans-Winters discusses the difference between punishments when students of color violate zero tolerance policies versus when white students violate these policies:

Whereas middle-class White youth found to be in violation of zero-tolerance policies (which is subjective, given that it can include any acts of subordination or perceived "threats" of violence) tend to be assigned to counseling to receive a slap on the wrist for violation of school code, non-White youth are more likely to come in contact with police officers and, consequently, the juvenile correctional system.<sup>9</sup>

Evans-Winters 2

Evans-Winters makes sure to point out that although black and white students seem to be violating zero tolerance policies, the different punishments given to the two groups don't reflect that. Her statistics show that students of color are suspended and expelled at higher rates than any other demographic. Zero tolerance policies show the inequality in discipline between

students of color and white students because we can see from research that although the same number of students from each group are breaking the zero tolerance policies, the discipline rates are not equal. *Locating Black Girls in Educational Policy Discourse* helps its audience see that zero tolerance policies contribute to the high rates of suspension and expulsion against students of color. These policies also do not do what schools are supposed to give to students: the opportunity to learn. Zero tolerance policies don't teach students what they need to succeed in life because students, more specifically students of color, are unable to make a mistake and get a second chance like the white students are given. Not only does zero tolerance policies account for the high rates of discipline for students of color, but the teacher-student relationship is also a factor in discipline.

Zero tolerance policies are also not a forever solution. When they were originally introduced to education, their goal was to lower the violence in schools but with the different influences that were paired with zero tolerance policies. Components such as adding police officers to the school environment as well as higher security measures in schools did somewhat lower the rates of violence maybe among students but not in the school in general. Udi Ofer shows the increasing rate of policing in NYC schools in his report *Criminalizing the Classroom: The Rise of Aggressive Policing and Zero Tolerance Discipline in New York City Public Schools*. Ofer highlights the dramatic change in discipline in these schools, stating that "the number of students suspended on an annual basis has increased dramatically, from 31,879 in the 2002-2003 school year to 73,943 in 2008-2009" (Ofer 1380) even though the student population was dropping. The students who were affected the most by this increase were students of color who come from low-income families. The policing policies that the New York schools adopted

during the time that Ofer was reporting mostly had to do with the discipline involving the role of police officers.

Ofer shares the type of freedom that police officers, or peace officers/school resource officers, have in these schools. Police officers wear the NYPD uniform, establishing their police status in schools. They also had “the authority to stop, frisk, question, detain, search, and arrest students,” (Ofer 1384). With this authority, school resource officers have the opportunity to police students as they wish although they weren’t trained to deal with behavior issues in schools. Police officers are trained to deal with criminals and in turn treat students as if they were. This treatment and the environment it creates is not what students need to succeed academically, and in fact, it hurts them in the long run. By being targeted by police in schools for their skin color, hair color, or minor behavior infractions such as writing on a desk, students don’t feel safe in their learning environment. This makes it difficult for students to gain a proper education with interruptions like getting sent to the principal’s office or reprimanded by officers, suspensions, and/or expulsions. In policed environments, like a lot of urban, public schools have now become, zero tolerance policies do not help lower the statistics of discipline among students of color; it mostly negatively affects their learning.

Zero tolerance policies are also mentioned in Ben Kirshner’s *Youth Activism in an Era of Education Inequality*. He writes that these policies aren’t effective and they do not serve justice (Kirshner 27). While describing an incident at a school he was studying, he felt as though the zero tolerance policies that were enforced on that day for that incident did not fix any problems. He called it a “band-aid that didn’t heal a deeper problem,” (Kirshner 27). He argues that zero tolerance policies don’t address the real problem that is happening in a certain school. This may be incidents of bias, racism, sexism, or other incidents. Zero tolerance policies do not fix

problems, they simply place blame and punishment on the guilty party but it doesn't teach them why what they did was wrong. He introduces social and emotional learning as one of the aspects that can help students and faculty address real problems in a healthy way instead of in a punitive way.

## **SOCIAL AND EMOTIONAL LEARNING**

Social and emotional learning is a practice that could be a new system introduced to public schools to adopt and may change educational practices. I define social and emotional learning below while also including the different arguments that my research brings into account when looking at this type of learning. I also introduce my subject of this thesis: Blackstone Academy Charter School (BACS). This small charter school in Pawtucket, RI is where 350 high school students from Pawtucket, Providence, or Central Falls go to school. I point out which practices are used at Blackstone that I have found in my research to support the practice, specifically in their advisory curriculum. This supports why public schools may be able to adopt, or at least aspects of, "The Blackstone Way."

### ***Defining Social and Emotional Learning***

Moving towards implementing more social and emotional learning (SEL) in classroom settings, it's important to understand what SEL really is. Stephanie Jones and Emily Doolittle define SEL. They remind their audience that social and emotional learning can be called many other names. Social and emotional learning includes 21st century skills such as soft skills and noncognitive skills (Jones and Doolittle 3). They continue to define SEL as "children's ability to learn about and manage their own emotions and interactions in ways that benefit themselves and

others, and that help children and youth succeed in schooling, the workplace, relationships, and citizenship,” (Jones and Doolittle 4). Social and emotional learning gives these students the opportunity to grab not just academically but personally. Students are also able to have mentorship as well as friendship in schools that may last beyond middle and/or high school. Not only does social and emotional learning help students while they are in school, but it helps them after they graduate high school and go to college or work for a job.

Maurice Elias’s definition of social and emotional learning goes along with Jones and Doolittle’s definition. In the first chapter of his book *Promoting Social and Emotional Learning: Guidelines for Educators*, Elias agrees that social and emotional learning includes managing and understanding one’s social and emotional aspects of themselves. Elias adds that it also includes “self-awareness, control of impulsivity, working cooperatively, and caring about oneself and others,” (Elias 2). These aspects are important to teach students of color in urban schools because a lot of students have experienced trauma at one point in their life, no matter if it were big or small. Working on controlling their impulsivity is extremely important and can help de-escalate situations that may escalate due to forces out of their control. Students can also learn how to work in teams or group settings early on in their education, practicing a skill they will most likely be using in their future careers. Adding to the previously stated definition of social and emotional learning, Elias states that SEL is the “missing piece” of classroom learning. This piece of SEL could include service learning activities or developmental skills in the classroom such as critical thinking. These social and emotional activities can teach students academic skills as well as life skills of networking and communicating with others.

Ben Kirshner connects social and emotional learning to the core of positive youth development in his book *Youth Activism in an Era of Education Inequality*. Although he puts

SEL in the context of youth programming, Kirshner concludes that using the method that a lot of programs use such as building a relationship with your teacher. Kirshner describes the possibility of learning effectively when the teacher-student relationship is strong. He specifically writes, “[If a program is high quality,] these are settings where young people encounter caring adults who go by their first names and build relationships that attend to many parts of a young person’s life, including school, family, peers, and future aspirations (Kirshner 29). When engaging in social and emotional learning, I agree with Kirshner that the relationship with the authority figure needs to be caring and go into many aspects of a youth’s life, not just academically. Later in this paper, I will be discussing Blackstone Academy Charter School (BACS) and at that school, the social and emotional learning and connecting happens in advisory. This system that they have in place is exactly what Kirshner describes but they have put it in a classroom setting. I use this research to show that practicing this type of SEL is seen as successful at BACS.

### ***Benefits of Social and Emotional Learning***

Social and emotional learning has its benefits for students and for teachers. Zins and Elias show some of these benefits in their article *Social and Emotional Learning: Promoting the Development of All Students*. Looking at table 3, it shows a list titled “Examples of SEL Outcomes Related to Success in School and Life” In this list it divides the examples of traits or behaviors that were shown in the success stories of students who were taught SEL into three categories; attitudes, behaviors, and performance. Some of the traits or actions that stuck out to me, matching what I heard in my interviews at Blackstone Academy:

- Better sense of community (bonding) and view of school as caring
- Stronger commitment to democratic values
- Greater trust and respect for teachers
- More classroom participation and higher engagement



These points mirrored what I saw at Blackstone. In several conversations, students that were part of an advisory shared that they respected their advisory teacher because they got to know them better than other teachers. For the first two points, one can see this by attending one of BACS's morning meeting. This is where everyone in the school including students, staff, and administrators attend a school meeting in the morning before classes start. Some days it could be 15-30 minutes but other days it can be up to an hour or two, depending on the schedule for the day. During this meeting, sometimes an advisory has control of what they want to do that day in the morning meeting, like a presentation for the advisory in front of the school. At this morning meeting, a spectator can see community building and a "strong commitment to democratic values" through the support that students give each and every student. If someone is performing a play during morning meeting, a student is able to be goofy if they want and they are comfortable to get into their character. A spectator can also see the connections that students have formed between each other and their teacher(s). They are able to be vulnerable with each other and realize that they are going to have bad times but they will get through it. These benefits that Zins and Elias share connects to Blackstone through their advisory system. Advisors are able to get to know their advisory students on a more personal level than the average student. Students at Blackstone are gaining these benefits because of their advisory classes. Learning these social and emotional skills helps Blackstone's students succeed during their years at Blackstone and beyond.

In my research, I also found that creating and maintaining a personal-academic connection with students is important. This is done at Blackstone in their advisory programs through the experiences they have going on field trips with their advisory, running events together, presenting during morning meetings, and supporting each other through their

academics and personal life. Elias, et. al. write about this connection between teachers and their students in their chapter *How Does Social and Emotional Education Fit in Schools?* from their book *Promoting Social and Emotional Learning: Guidelines for Educators*. They start off their chapter by writing on this teacher-student connection. They state that when students are able to be vulnerable with their feelings constructively in the classroom it creates a bridge to academic assignments and an improvement to students' learning (Elias et. al. 19). They write that in order to make this connection storytelling has to be an integral part of the learning curriculum. Elias et. al. argues that "storytelling creates an interconnected narrative of what youngsters care about in their lives today. Many stories are about the preciousness of relationships," showing that personal side to that student, allowing other students or their advisor to reach out to them if they need it or encourage them if they need it. This benefits students because they are able to talk through their feelings whether it be of anger, jealousy, positivity, in a constructive way. Blackstone's advisory includes Elias et. al's idea of storytelling by checking in with each other during advisory in big class circles or individually.

Social and emotional learning also promotes calmness and reduces stress if done correctly. This is discussed in the book *Promoting Emotional and Social Development in School: A Practical Guide* written by Julia Bird, Lynne Gerlach, and Simon Blake. In one of their chapters, they discuss the benefits of social and emotional learning by focusing on the benefits of SEL, calmness and stress reduction. They suggest several activities that have been shown to have positive effects. These activities include circle time, visualization, and safe spaces. Circle time, according to Bird, Gerlach, and Blake, "promote[s] positive relationships and behavior within the school... used in an ongoing way, with children and adults who work with them coming together and sitting in a circle to discuss feelings, thoughts and issues that are affecting the day-

today life of a school,” (Bird et. al, ch 6.) Blackstone uses circle time during their advisory periods, checking in with each other, asking to share a high of the week and a low of the week. A lot of students expressed to me that they love their advisory and it makes a difference in their lives.

Bird, Gerlach, and Blake also discuss the activity of visualization can benefit students when paired with SEL. They write that these visualization exercises help students “learn and develop empathy through imagination and visualization,” (Bird et. al., ch 6). Visualization activities can include community mapping, as done in PC’s public service classes, as well as affirmation shields that are done at Blackstone. These activities help students “imagine themselves achieving new things, exploring new ideas and in this way can promote confidence and a willingness to try,” (Bird et. al., ch 6). By promoting imagination, students could possibly envision themselves having a career that not a lot of people want. It could be the average job or they could be confident enough to start a business themselves. Whatever they decide, they had the opportunity to explore and reflect on what it is they want to do.

The last benefit that Bird, Gerlach, and Blake discuss are safe spaces. They mention that safe spaces began to have a part in schools for students who get stressed or angry and ‘self-refer’ themselves or take a break. Although the authors suggest having a stress ball or different textured fabric for students to ground themselves, (Bird et. al., ch 6) Blackstone allows students to have freedom on what they want to do. Yes, in some circumstances, a teacher may give the student a choice w but most of the time, at Blackstone, a student is able to take a walk or go talk to someone who is available to talk and the student is comfortable with.

## **SEL AT BLACKSTONE ACADEMY CHARTER SCHOOL**

As mentioned in this paper, Blackstone Academy Charter School (BACS), located in Pawtucket, RI is home to 350 high school students who live in Providence, Pawtucket, or Central Falls. The school grew out of their enrichment summer program, the SPIRIT program. Their approach to students learning is more of a hands on approach as well as based in community and service learning. The school's demographics are 61% Hispanic and 39% Non-Hispanic. What is truly unique about BACS and their curriculum is their advisory program. This curriculum is based around social and emotional learning. Rather than having a typical lesson plan and goal to meet by the end of every class, BACS allows their students to focus on personal and academic relationships during advisory while learning social and emotional skills.

I chose to focus on the way BACS implements social and emotional learning in their curriculum because as this thesis highlights, social and emotional learning is lacking in public school and other educational settings. Blackstone has successfully integrated SEL in the classroom, showing that it is possible but by focusing on Blackstone, I share some suggestions on what public schools can do to begin to have social and emotional learning happening during the school day. My research included taking pictures of the school building (Appendix 1) as well as conducting interviews with advisors and their advisories as a group (see Appendix 2 for interview questions). What I found in my interviews was how different the discipline policies and procedures at Blackstone were different than those in public schools. I also discovered how close of a "family" these advisories are. One other thing that I noticed about having the advisory system at Blackstone is that advisors and advisories are always there for each other even after graduation. Of course this isn't how every advisory turns out but out of all the advisories to go through Blackstone, this is a continuous trend.

### ***Interviews with FG & Teachers/Advisors***

While studying Blackstone's advisory program, I conducted interviews with students and staff. I sat down and had a discussion with FG<sup>1</sup> to talk about the discipline process and to see how it was different. One limitation to this aspect of my research was due to things out of my control, I was unable to talk to Blackstone's Special Services Coordinator who handles all behavioral or discipline issues. FG is part of BACS's Student Support Team and also handles a few discipline cases throughout the year. FG was added to the staff during Blackstone's expansion beginning in 2015. On the day I went to interview FG, there had been a physical altercation as I arrived. During the interview I asked FG about Blackstone's discipline process and focused on the fate of the students who were involved in the physical altercation. What was interesting about what they told me was when I asked if advisors were involved in the discipline process. They explained that because behavior and discipline incidents happen during the day when an advisor is most likely teaching, they aren't initially involved. It usually concerns the Head of School, the Executive Director, or DW (see Appendix A.J.). FG made it clear that a student has the choice whether or not to involve their advisor about the incident, whether it be through mediation at a later time one-on-one or just having a conversation about it. This is different from how discipline would be handled in public school. As mentioned previously, minor incidents such as not paying attention in class may lead a student to be removed from a classroom by a student resource officer causing more harm to the child. At Blackstone there is mediation between a student and trusted teacher.

Connecting Blackstone's disciplinary policies and advisory system, I had the opportunity to interview a few advisors who had 12th grade advisory students. First I asked them questions about how they felt about their advisory class culture and to describe it using a few words. Some

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<sup>1</sup> All interviewee's names have been replaced with initials. Interviewees will also be described gender neutrally.

advisors used the word welcoming, honest, open, and a family. Some advisors support their claim with some examples as to why they said this. For example, SM (classroom picture and details in Appendix A.I.) said that they felt as though by going to student's sports games, knowing about their personal and academic lives, they felt as though they were a second parent to their advisory students. Senior advisor VH stated that their advisory could also be seen as a family dynamic because of their rocky beginning to their four years together. Their advisory had gone through its ups and down but because they had the time to sit down, reflect, and talk to each other, they collectively realized that they care about one another. I go on to ask how social and emotional learning is seen in advisory. One advisor, CP, stated that she makes sure her advisory is a safe space for her students, as discussed in Bird, Gerlach, and Blake's book *Promoting Emotional and Social Development: A Practical Guide*. She emphasized that she keeps her door closed during advisory, as to have outsiders at bay and not disturb the time she's granted with her advisory students. SM stated that she regularly checks in with her students about how their week is going and it replicates Bird et. al's idea of the circle time. By combining circle time activity and safe spaces, Blackstone teaches their students social and emotional skills to succeed in the future in both their personal and academic lives.

I also asked some teachers about Blackstone's discipline policies and if they agreed with them. Some teachers agreed, like SM, CD, and VH mentioned that Blackstone's policies are moving toward more of a restorative justice approach. SEL is included in the restorative justice curriculum as it includes peace circles, similar to circle time. Students are able to share their life experiences and hardships in these circles with their advisor and other trusting adults in the school such as DW or FG. Restorative justice is used at Blackstone because a lot of the students at BACS come from inner city schools who do have punitive discipline policies, as I described in

previous sections of this thesis. By using this method, students learn how to share their emotions in a healthy way and handle situations in an orderly fashion. One teacher, CP, said that she didn't agree with Blackstone's policies. They liked the direction the school was going in but didn't like that BACS has zero tolerance policies and some incidents they felt could have been handled a different way.

The last question I asked the teachers was about public schools adopting BACS's social and emotional learning through advisory. CD said that it could be adopted because people have written about and have done presentations about it more than any other aspect at Blackstone. A few of the teachers mentioned that BACS is a much smaller school than the public school even just up the street. Because they are a smaller school they are able to have smaller class sizes, having only 13-15 students per advisory. In public schools, which have a higher student population than Blackstone, advisory classes may include 20-25 students. The advisors gave me hope that this formula that Blackstone has found with the advisory classes can be transferred to public schools but they understand the difficulty in it when there are more students. They felt at times that their hands were full with the amount of students they currently have and couldn't imagine having as many students per advisory that public schools do. Because of the class size, CP answered that Blackstone's formula couldn't possibly work in public school because the class size is so large and you can't connect as well with that many students.

### ***Interviews with Students***

On top of interviewing someone from the discipline team and several teacher advisors, I also had the opportunity of sitting down with a few advisories to interview them about their advisors and advisory. SM's advisory called them their second parent, VH's advisory called them someone who can call them out to get their things together, and CD's advisory called them

a person they can go to with confidential things. After describing their advisory culture, I asked them if something they learned in advisory helped them in another situation or if they ever relied on their advisor for something. Some advisories said that they did rely on their advisor a lot during their four years at Blackstone. One student shared that she was having personal troubles at home and she opened up both in their check-in circles and with her advisor one-on-one. She expressed how much support she felt at that moment and she appreciated it because she really needed it. She said that if she had gone to the high school in her city she probably wouldn't have gotten the help or support she needed.

The interviews I conducted with students showed me the difference in outcomes for students who learn social and emotional skills in school. It also showed me that students are able to act their age and be themselves instead of having a fear of punishment looming over their head. Blackstone's demographic displays the enormous population of students of color. For these students to be learning emotional and social skills in class is important because it improves their chances for success after high school, it allows students to accomplish something so simple yet a big deal like a high school diploma or even a college degree. A lot of these students expressed that if they didn't have their advisor there to guide them along the way, they wouldn't have known how to apply for college, how to find scholarships, deal with problems at home, and/or how to communicate professionally with others. Unlike the students in the statistics that were shared in earlier sections, Blackstone has a high graduation rate and a high rate of those who go on to graduate from a 2-4 year college or university. Their opportunities grow because they weren't held back because of school conditions and people's perception.



I would also say that this section of my thesis is limited therefore might not include all the information because my study was cut short. I was not able to interview multiple advisories as I did advisors.

## **CONCLUSION**

Social and emotional learning is crucial to a youth's education and the earlier they are exposed to social and emotional learning, the better. At the start of this paper, I discuss the reason I perform service and why it's important I do so in my philosophy of service. Then I move onto my literature review and discuss the literature that introduced my research. These sources also helped me learn that social and emotional education is rare but it has positive outcomes. I also learned about the discipline statistics of students of color and why they are higher than in past years. Through this analysis, I then apply the solution of introducing social and emotional learning into classrooms. I define what social and emotional learning is and show what benefits come from teaching this curriculum.

After discussing discipline rates and how social and emotional learning may be the key to lowering those rates, I introduce Blackstone Academy Charter School. I analyze the school in a social emotional lens, identifying the social and emotional impact that advisory has on its students. Blackstone's advisory system, dubbed "The Blackstone Way," was one way social and emotional learning is present at BACS. Because of the way their advisory system and curriculum is set up, it allows students to stay in touch with themselves and their emotions. While preparing them for post-grad life, advisors are also there to provide advice and are their advisory student's go-to person. I describe the interviews I did with Blackstone's Student Support staff, advisors, and advisories. These interviews showed me that Blackstone is adopting a new way to discipline students: restorative justice. Rather than disciplining a student with suspension or another




punitive punishment, Blackstone students are learning conflict resolution and communication skills by holding peace circles and circle time.

By studying Blackstone, it led me to conclude that with harsher punishments such as suspension or expulsions lower discipline rates. One thing that I believe made an impact on discipline rates at Blackstone is their advisory program. This is where a lot of social and emotional learning is happening. This is where real life learning is happening because students are meeting each other and are forming connections with their peers and their advisors.

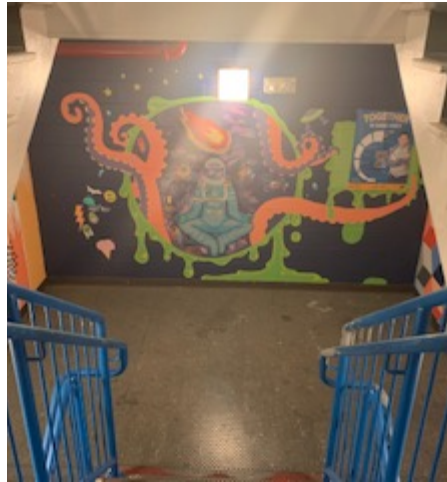
Blackstone is the only school that has this advisory system and for their discipline rates to average lower than other schools leads me to believe that the way Blackstone handles discipline is the direction that Rhode Island should be adopting because it doesn't cause students harm and it doesn't traumatize them further. Social and emotional learning is that door to open when trying to lower discipline rates because students learn how to display their feelings and communicate with others. When students learn the skills that Blackstone is targeting, they are able to succeed better in their future than those who are not exposed to learning social and emotional skills in a healthy way.

## **APPENDIX A**

| <i>Picture</i> | <i>Description</i> |
|----------------|--------------------|
|----------------|--------------------|

|   |   |
|---|---|
| <p>A.</p>    | <p>This is a picture of CD's room. She is an English teacher and one of the teachers I interviewed.</p>   |
| <p>B.</p>   | <p>This is the first floor hallway of BACS. This holds many of the original classrooms that the school had when it opened, still being used today. As you can see it is a bit outdated compared to the ground level hallway (below).</p>  |
| <p>C.</p>  | <p>This is Blackstone's College Access Wall. This includes several college pamphlets and other information about colleges in the state, New England, and nationally for students to read and take if they need. Blackstone is known for their high rates of college acceptance and enrollment in 2-4 year institutions by their school graduates.</p> |

D.



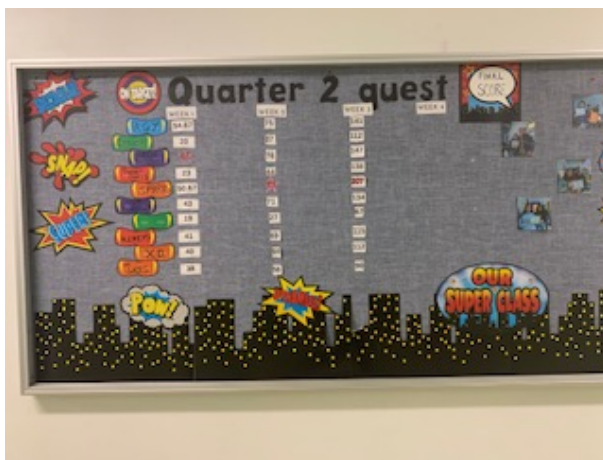
This is the hallway that connects the ground level and first floor of the school. Students in art classes were able to design graphic art for this wall (and throughout the entire stairwell) as well as paint it.

E.



This is the ground level hallway of BACS. It has more lockers as well as the home to many classrooms in the school. This level is the most recently updated section of the school, updated when the school expanded a few years ago.

F.



This is a progress board. Although I'm not sure if it's measuring grades, test scores, or number of books read, one can see the positive reinforcement that BACS strives on. It helps students show pride in their work and accomplishments.

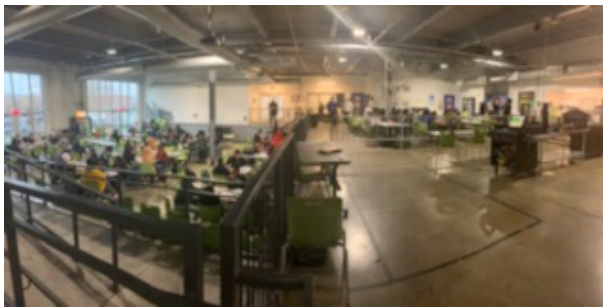
G.



This is BACS's community opportunity board, managed by their community engagement liaison RH.

She helps students get in contact with organizations in Providence, Pawtucket, and Central Falls to help students find time to engage in their community rather than resorting to getting in trouble.

H.





This is Blackstone's multi-purpose room. It's not called a cafeteria because this room has many different purposes. Students use this as the lunch room, gym, stage, etc.

I.



This is SM's room. She is also another teacher I interviewed for this paper. She is a history teacher who also teaches gender studies classes. SM has 12th grade advisory students.



|  |  |
|--|--|
| <p>J.</p>   | <p>This is DW's office. He is the coordinator of the college access program at BACS while being the 12th grade Dean and the director of the SPIRIT program. His office is used for SAT test sign-up, meetings with school Deans, applying for scholarships and college as well as a space to hangout. DW has 11th grade advisory students.</p> |
| <p>K.</p>  | <p>This is EM's room. She is an English teacher at BACS. As you can see, her classroom is set up very differently than other classrooms in the building and other schools. This setting shows the complex learning environment that students are in when attending BACS.</p>   |

## APPENDIX B

### Research Questions:

#### **B.A. For Students:**

1. Who is your advisor?
2. How would you describe your advisory class? Your advisor?
3. What are some of the learning activities that go on during advisory? Are they helpful? How would you change them if you could?
4. How is Blackstone's advisory different from other advisory classes you've been a part of in the past (or from advisory classes your friends take at other schools?)

5. What are some skills you learned in advisory/from your advisor that have changed your personal life? Was there ever a time you were struggling (academically or personally) and leaned on your advisor?
6. Was there ever a time where you or another student was given a second chance because your/their advisor vouched for them? How did it go?
7. Was there ever a time you felt ‘policed’ at Blackstone or saw that happen to someone else? Can you describe that experience?

**B. B. For Advisors:**

1. Name, Grade you advise, how long you’ve been at Blackstone
2. How would you describe your advisory class?
3. What do you think is beneficial in your advisory curriculum/the advisory setup?
4. How do you incorporate social and emotional learning in advisory? Do you have some aspects of social and emotional learning in your academic classes? How?
5. Do you agree with the discipline policies at Blackstone? Why or why not?
6. Do you think it’s possible for public schools to adopt some type of version of Blackstone’s advisory classes/curriculum?

**B.C. For Disciplinarians:**

1. What does the Blackstone discipline process look like from start to finish? Who is involved, what are the steps, resolution?
2. What are some different scenarios that could occur between incidents (fighting vs drug use vs misbehavior vs truancy)?
3. What are some discipline practices or policies that Blackstone had adopted that match the policies in public schools? (i.e. zero tolerance) What practices are different? Why?
4. What effect do you think Blackstone’s unique discipline style has on students? The community?
5. Do you see social and emotional aspects in the disciplinary system at Blackstone? Where?
6. Do you think Blackstone’s rate of discipline incidents are higher, lower, or match those reported in public schools? Why or why not?
7. Do you think Blackstone’s advisory programs help lower discipline incidents/rates? Why or why not and how?

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